

God's Future...Now

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Luke 21:5-19

...for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

These are the last days of the Christian liturgical year. In two weeks, Advent will bring us to a new year of our journey with Christ. But for now, as the Season after Pentecost draws to a close, the scripture readings invite us to a wider and deeper spiritual awareness. We hear about "new heavens and a new earth," about "the days that are coming," and the call to be alert, for "the time is near." These are ULTIMATE things, the biggest picture possible. What is the ultimate goal of life? How will things be ultimately worked out? Such questions are encouraged during these last days of what Thomas Merton called the "seasons of the spirit."

Isaiah 65 is one of the most sublime readings in all scripture. It touches our deepest hopes and longings. God renewing all of reality, new heavens and a new earth. Peace and justice as the order and nature of things. People enjoying the fruits of their own labors without being exploited. This is not about life after death, or some far off heaven. It is an unfolding of life the way God made it to be.

We need this ultimate sense of things. It is our long range hope, that life not only has ultimate meaning but is unfolding according to that meaning. It is the kind of complete, ultimate and inclusive vision of life that speaks against every effort to force life into our narrow and self-serving molds. This vision, expressed so beautifully in Isaiah, sheds its clear and revealing light over every narrow religious or political view and program. Eberhard Bethge, friend and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, made several visits to Lynchburg in the 1980s and 90s. On one visit, he and Renate, his wife and Bonhoeffer's niece, attended a service at a famous local church. There they saw the bold and uncritical uniting of Christianity and U.S. nationalism, the cross and the flag. Bethge's observation, out of his experience with the Nazification of the church in 1930s Germany, was, "Whenever the cross and the flag are placed beside one another, the cross always loses."

Isaiah's vision broadens our perspective beyond all boundaries of self, nation, even religion. This is how Reality itself is unfolding and wants to unfold. It speaks against all our efforts to restrict this vision of life to only those who are like ourselves, who think or act like us. Even those of us dedicated to peace and justice often do not embody those realities in ourselves and the ways we relate to others. Intolerance, lack of listening, and absence of respect frequently dominate our spirits in spite of the talk of justice and peace. We can talk peace and justice until we are blue in the face, but until we are PERSONS who embody those realities in the ways we treat others, we can't expect to have any influence.

God's dream for life, expressed surpassingly in Isaiah 65, is not just a future time. And it is not idealism. It is what God is doing now. It is the future breaking into the present, the future being born now. Even more than that, Isaiah's vision expresses the very nature of reality that is being brought forth by God. What God intends for us and the world is always moving into the present, shaping the present. What we dream of, what we hope for is to be embodied in us and our own lives each moment. The future is now!

This is what it means when we pray the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It has the sense of "Let your will be done, let your kingdom come," and let it be so in me right this moment! Let it be so with us as a community of Jesus! Where is this new heaven and earth, this kingdom coming? First of all it is to dawn in us. Our own hearts and minds. Our own lives. Our own relationships. Our own community right here, how we relate to one another, how we embody Jesus' life and teachings, not just talk about him.

This is the really exciting thing about this business of the ULTIMATE nature and movement of life. It is not in some distant future and certainly not in some heaven without an earth. It is right here and right now, or at least it can be as long as we open ourselves to God's dream for life and experience and learn to live that dream as we follow Jesus, who embodied that dream, that Word. Thich Nhat Hanh is fond of saying that the miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on this good, green earth.

Yesterday Phil Boyce and I took two boys from the Festival Center on a hike in the mountains. We climbed up The Devil's Marble Yard, a massive mountainside of boulders. These boys had never experienced anything like this. You could sense and see the wonderful effect of it in their faces and spirits. At the top, I had a moment to sit quietly looking over Arnold's Valley, bathed in the soft brilliance of the autumn sun. I realized anew that the world is as it should be. Life as God created it knows what it is doing. It is we humans who get ourselves out of synch with it. The miracle is not the kingdom of God as some far off dream. The miracle is that we can live in that kingdom now.

I think that's what is going on with Jesus and the disciples there in Jerusalem. They are there for the last time in Jesus' life. They are impressed with the grandeur of the temple. Wow, Jesus, just look at this wonderful building! Isn't it great? Isn't our temple the greatest thing in the world? Isn't our religion the greatest one in the world? Jesus immediately pours water on their enthusiasm. Not one stone will be left upon another. This is all going to end as God brings about the fulfillment of God's purposes and dreams for life.

Just last week we heard Haggai telling the people that God wanted them to rebuild the temple that was destroyed at the time of their exile. They needed the temple project to re-center their shattered lives in God's presence with them. With Jesus, it is a different time and circumstance. His message has been the kingdom of God. His call to discipleship has been an invitation for people to follow him in living the life of that kingdom NOW. The ultimate purpose of religion and religious practice is the life of God's kingdom, living our lives the way God made us to live them. When John Lennon wrote his song "Imagine," he got it right: "Imagine there's ...no religion, too." It is the fading away of religion as the life to which religion points us fully unfolds in us. The kingdom of God is not the same as Christianity. The kingdom of God is not a theocracy, a human government implementing religious laws. The kingdom of God is not the church and its structures, rites, doctrines, and practices. The kingdom of God is what God is doing to bring the world and us to full manifestation as God's creation and God's creatures.

The disciples get excited. So, when is this going to happen? What signs can we look for? You can almost see them rubbing their hands excitedly. Now those other people are going to get theirs! Now our way is going to win out! Jesus continues to adjust their attitudes. Essentially he says that speculating on the how's and when's of God's coming kingdom are none of our business. Nation will rise against nation. There will be wars and rumors of wars. BUT, says Jesus, that's not it. Don't get fooled by signs. A whole religious industry has been built around our being able to know and predict ultimate things. Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, and others have gotten rich and famous off of their thrillers about the world coming to an end. T.V. evangelists draw timelines and name the major players in the end of the world drama, the "good guys" always being Christians and the United States, of course. You can't know these things, says Jesus. It isn't your business. That is a distraction from what IS your business—living now as those who belong to that realm of God, life as God made it to be lived.

That is the essential meaning of Jesus' words about his disciples being persecuted, dragged into court, and abandoned by their families because of their faithfulness. Most of us will never face the exact kinds of persecution Jesus talked about. But if we are trying to faithfully live our lives according to Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and earth, of life that is available to all in fairness, justice, peace, and well-being, then we will soon see and experience a human world resistant to those very things. And sometimes the way things are in our society and world will lead us to think that this new heaven and earth thing is nothing more than a wish-dream, a bit of wistful idealism. That is why is it so important for us to touch this wider and deeper vision of reality, and stay in touch with it through our inward journey work. It is not idealism, or God's forcing upon us and the world something that is foreign to life. It is the very nature and shape of life as God created it to be. Our addictions to war, greed, self-centeredness and the like sometimes seem predominant. But none of that has an ultimate future, for it is all contrary to the very nature of life itself.

You remember Frost's poem "Mending Wall"? It has that famous line in it: "something there is that does not love a wall." Frost was meditating on a New England rock wall, and how nature slowly, imperceptibly, but surely dismantles it. He saw the power within life that constantly works toward life, wearing down walls and separations and human efforts to divide and possess. I think that is what is at the core of what Isaiah's vision is about and what Jesus was talking about. And it gives us a hope in which we can root our hearts even when everything around us speaks against God's dream for a new heaven and earth.

There is a whole world of people who are living out of Isaiah's vision, whether they are "religious" or not. Afterall, that is what it is about. Not promoting religion, not getting stuck in religion, and certainly not fighting over religion, but living out of and toward the vision of life to which our religion points us--life the way God made it to be lived. And living that life now.